

Sentence Punctuation

How do we punctuate a sentence? Should we put a period at the end of it, even if the sentence is a question, or should we use a question mark instead? If the sentence is expressing fear or excitement, should we use an exclamation point?

Declarative and Imperative Sentences

For the English grammar system, we punctuate declarative sentences (statements of fact, opinion, or observation) and imperative sentences (commands or requests) with the period.

- Example: *This morning I heard the dog across the street barking again.*
- Example: *I haven't slept very well since my neighbors started keeping their dog outside at night.*
- Example: *Please, hand me the remote control.*
- Example: *Give me the remote control.*

Interrogative Sentences

We punctuate interrogative sentences (questions) with the question mark.



- Example: *Are the neighbors tying up the dog this evening?*
- Example: *Where is the remote control?*
- Example: *Why can't I ever hold the remote control?*

Exclamatory Sentences

For sentences expressing surprise, anger, joy, or other strong emotions, we use the exclamation point.

- Example: *That poor little dog!*
- Example: *It's out there all alone!*



Getting More Complicated

What if you have an interrogative within a declarative sentence, as in this example? Should you put a period or a question mark at the end of the sentence?

- Example: *I don't know where we should go*

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You wouldn't put a question mark at the end of this sentence because "where we should go" isn't a full question; it's a dependent clause. By itself, it's incomplete. Would you walk up to someone and ask them, "Where we should go?" No, you'd rephrase your inquiry as a complete sentence: "Where should we go?"

What should you do if you have a declarative sentence containing a complete interrogative sentence? How would you punctuate this example?

- Example: *He asked the fortune teller how did you know that I'd recently inherited a large sum of money*

First, pick out the main declarative sentence. *He asked the fortune teller _____* (something). This leaves the something that he's asking: *how did you know that I'd recently inherited a large sum of money*. How would you punctuate this? Hint: It sounds like he's speaking dialogue, doesn't it? And you'd be right. That's how you'd punctuate the question.

- Example: *He asked the fortune teller, "How did you know that I'd recently inherited a large sum of money?"*

A Trick that Can Help

There's a trick to all of this. If you have an interrogative statement or clause embedded within another sentence and you aren't sure how to punctuate it, first underline the interrogative. Then say the interrogative by itself. Does it sound like a question you'd ask someone else (e.g. "How did you know that?") or does it sound like an incomplete statement (e.g., why we left town)?

If it sounds like a complete question, put a question mark after it, and if it's spoken dialogue, put quotation marks around the interrogative (including the question mark) as well. If it sounds like an incomplete question, it's probably a dependent clause and should be punctuated with a period only if it ends the sentence.